

**Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe. *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1986) xix, 201 pp., \$19.95.**

This is a book that is important for what it begins and for what will follow it, as well as for what it is. It demonstrates that there have been hundreds of black women photographers, working almost from the time the camera was invented, whose contributions, and even existence, have not been documented. Mainstream histories of photography have included few black photographers and no black female photographers. I expect this book to stimulate others to research the many women photographers mentioned here, as well as those who are missing, and I hope they do this research before the materials are lost.

Jean Moutoussamy-Ashe is a practicing black woman photographer, and has done extensive research, much of it in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, supplemented by interviews with some of the photographers and their survivors. The book is organized chronologically, with an "Historical Overview" for each period covered (1839-1910, 1910-1930, 1930-1950, 1950-1970, and 1970-1985). More detailed writeups, which generally include biographical and business information, and sometimes a small portfolio of their pictures, are given for selected individuals. At the end of the book are short "bio-bibliographies" of the women covered in the text, plus some others, followed by general listings of names (organized by time periods) and then a "geographical index" (also including time periods) of the women covered. There are footnotes and a selected bibliography, followed by an index.

The "Introduction" states that "The photographers ... [profiled in this book] were selected because of their accomplishments in the field of photography ... 'accomplished' refers to their ability to document their community or personal lives. Their inclusion here illustrates their ambition and drive to produce work, often while confronting adversity" (xviii). Unfortunately, how these selection criteria were applied to each individual profiled is not stated, so reasons for inclusion or exclusion are not clear. There is also no discussion of the selection process used to choose the photos displayed in the book and no discussion about the people in the photos and how/why/when the photos were taken. In addition, the discussion gives only spotty information on the context of the historical times and the situation of blacks and others at each time period, and only occasional reference to the photographic equipment and processes used by the women and the effects that these had on their output.

As an anthropologist interested in visual media and their production, I am acutely aware that photographs do not take themselves, but rather are the products of particular times and places, and of particular cultural expectations about who should take pictures, of whom, at what times and

places, and what should be in the resulting photographs. For this reason, what I find in this book raises more questions than it answers. In common with many other books by and about photographers, there is almost no discussion of this social/cultural side of photograph production, except occasionally, as for example the interview with a man who hired his "Camera Girls" in a nightclub during WWII. Somewhat more of this kind of information can be found in another book by the photographic specialist at the Schomburg Center who assisted Moutoussamy-Ashe. This book is: *Black Photographers 1984-1940: A Bio-Bibliography*, by Deborah Willis-Thomas (NY: Garland, 1985). Unfortunately, Willis-Thomas mentions almost no female photographers, so her book can be used as a supplement to *Viewfinders*, but not a substitute for it.

Even though the book does not cover all that I would like, what it does show is another side to black life than the poverty-stricken one so often pictured in photographs of these time periods. The photographs included show black people as they *wanted* to be seen, well-dressed, in comfortable surroundings, as members of stable groups and families, in many parts of the country. The lives of the women covered, and the photographs they took, should cause us all to begin to ask new questions about their lives and to examine our stereotypes. For example: was photography an accepted profession for women? How was their work viewed by their communities? How did they get their technical knowledge of photography? How did they go about setting up their businesses? Who were their customers? How did they stand in relation to white female photographers of their time period?

I recommend this book for the stimulation that it will bring to those who will research their pasts and the new questions that they will raise about those pasts—and their own potentials.

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**Mark Naison. *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*. (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1984) xxi, 355 pp., \$7.95 paper.**

The Communist Party and its relationship to blacks in the United States is a difficult subject to fully research. Necessary critical information must lie in still secret vaults in Washington and in Moscow. Naison's former dissertation is a praise-worthy effort to unravel fact